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SIMON PETER: A TYPE OF THEOLOGICAL TRANSITION.

(JOHN 1:35-42; MARK 8:27-33. ACTS 2:14-36. ACTS 10:1-11:18;
GAL. 2:11-14; ACTS 15:7-11.)

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TO ONE who thinks of Simon only as an impulsive, passionate man who denied his Lord, the new name given him by Jesus can appear only satirical. If he were a stone, he was surely a rolling stone! Yet here as elsewhere the insight of Jesus is vindicated by a consideration of all the facts at our disposal. Passionate and impulsive Peter certainly was, but moral stability was the real basis of his character. This moral stability it was that not only made him the leader of the Twelve and the Rock of the historic church, but also made possible an almost typical growth in religious experience and resultant theology. The book of Acts, in itself a history of the transition of Christianity from a phase of Judaism to its proper sphere as a cosmopolitan religion, is itself epitomized in the career of its first hero. It is here Peter differed from Paul. While the Apostle to the Gentiles leaped at once into the radical position that followed logically the acknowledgment of Jesus as Christ, Peter advanced toward the same position but slowly, through experience and often through conscious effort. As a consequence, while Paul stands in a class into which the modern man may but occasionally enter, the entire life of Peter is a lesson in the possibility of theological transition. His creed, "I believe that Jesus is the Christ," never needed revision, so elementary it was; but the content of that creed was greater after each spiritual crisis through which he passed. His faith in Jesus was the central force of his life; but the implications of that faith grew ever more numerous, liberal, and even radical.

In this growth of Peter in the understanding of his religious faith three stages are clearly to be recognized :

I.

There was first the *faith born of preconceptions and authority*. Jesus had come to John an esteemed, exemplary, deeply religious, doubtless somewhat educated carpenter from Nazareth—the last place from which even an Israelite without guile would expect the Christ to appear. As such an unknown man John's other converts must have received him, if indeed they regarded him at all. Yet John recognized him as the Coming One whom he announced, and pointed him out to some of his disciples, among whom was Andrew, Simon's brother. On the strength of his word these few men abandoned their old master and followed Jesus. Peter joined the little group, because others had told him Jesus was the Christ. Other evidence he had none—not so much as a word of Jesus upon which he could base an independent faith. He believed in Jesus because he believed in John and Andrew. And neither John nor Andrew, nor any man in all Palestine, knew the sort of Christ Jesus was to be. Those who joined him read into his future their own preconceptions, and accepted him because they believed he would be the sort of Christ they wanted and expected.

What these expectations were we know. Peter, like the other Jews of his day, if indeed he did not look for actual revolution, expected that King Messiah would miraculously establish a holy kingdom of Jews and proselytes with Jerusalem as its capital and all men as its subjects. Even when under the influence of more spiritual Pharisaism these hopes reached out into moral regeneration and heavens of saints and hells of sinners, the ethnic and national characteristics persisted. The Christ might come from the skies, but his kingdom was to center in Judea, where political and official honors were to come to those who accepted him. This future Peter awaited in Jesus. Every morning he and the others of the little inner group of converts expected that before the sun went down their Master would have taken upon himself his proper dignity, and they—or such of them as succeeded in

winning from him the promise—would be seated on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel, while Samaritans and Greeks and Romans suffered at the hands of their Christ the just penalties inflicted by Jehovah upon sinners. And every evening, looking back over their Master's day of strenuous, almost suicidal, philanthropy, they turned as confidently to the morrow and awaited the establishment of the glorious kingdom of which they never despaired.

It was inevitable that this faith, so tyrannized by preconception, should have refused to be disillusioned. The faith that faces disappointment with the conviction that the authority and preconception it represents are infallible, and that disappointment means the delay rather than the destruction of one's hopes, may at last be broken, but until then it balks at enlightenment. It was so with Peter. His faith refused to be shaken by the unwillingness of Jesus to be forced into revolution; it survived the refusal of his old-time religious leaders to see in Jesus anything more than a fraud and social agitator; it withstood the shock of seeing one he expected to be a world-conqueror choosing his friends from among the illiterate masses; it rose above the popular acceptance of Jesus as John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or some other prophet long since dead; it even rose above the less patient faith of those disciples who, tiring of the repeated postponement of the fulfilment of their hopes, abandoned the Master and went home to a more certain future and the untroubled enjoyment of prejudice. Peter loved Jesus, and his love energized his faith. But it did not make him less confident of the truthfulness of his preconceptions or more open to the teaching of Jesus himself. His noble confession among the villages of Cæsarea Philippi was but a restatement of the faith born of authority and provincial prejudice: "Thou art the Christ—but still thou art to be the sort of Christ I and all my kind want thee to be!" Faith like this fastens deep into personal affection; it may lead men to devoted service, even to martyrdom; but it is with difficulty broadened. It is joined to its preconceptions. It wishes to be left alone.

Yet even this is hardly a complete description of this faith

of Peter. The conviction of the inerrancy of the preconceptions which give the content to faith led him, just as it may lead any man, to an attack upon the man who proffers enlightenment. It was Peter who rebuked Jesus at the moment he endeavored to share with his disciples his own conception of his mission. It was Peter who held up to his Master the impossibility of messianic suffering. From his point of view, a defeated, maltreated, murdered Christ was a contradiction of terms. Confronted with his Master's own word he clung to his own opinions and deserved, though he could not appreciate, the rebuke he received.

This refusal to allow Jesus to unfold his own conception of messiahship characterized Peter's fellowship with his Master during the few months that were left him. Again and again Jesus attempted to explain to his followers the future that lay before him, and as often they refused to hear him, or feared to ask for explanations, or persisted in quarreling over who should be greatest in the kingdom that still momentarily was to be founded. Suffering and death were stones over which they stumbled. Jesus must triumph or he was not the Christ.

II.

When the prophecies of Jesus had been fulfilled, when he who, they thought, was to be the triumphant king died a criminal and revolting death, when an end seemed reached to all their hopes, the disciples' faith was paralyzed. They had hoped that it was he who should deliver Israel, but now he was dead. One alternative was before them: either Jesus in dying had shown himself not to be the Christ, or their old preconceptions were wrong. For a few hours they hesitated. Then the resurrection made all clear. They saw that the Christ must suffer and die if he were to rise again. And it was Peter who outlined the first Christian apologetic. His faith had entered upon a new stage — *the stage of reason*. "Therefore" is a wonderfully reassuring word, and at Pentecost Peter found the "therefore" of his Christology. For the first time he saw that the psalmists and prophets were unintelligible until they were seen to teach what Jesus himself had in vain tried to make him see.

His old prejudices vanished, and, with all the energy of his nature, he preached a Jesus who had been demonstrated the Christ by the resurrection from the dead. That which had been the stumbling-block of his faith became now its very cornerstone. Those elements of the teaching of Jesus he had feared to face became the substance of his gospel. But he had not given up his old faith; he had enriched it by that which he had formerly rejected. He had welcomed reality, he had abandoned his preconceptions, he had won new confidence and efficiency. The only pity is that he had not made the transition while his Lord was yet alive. The self-sufficiency of the disciple has cost the world many a teaching it might have had. And Peter was not the last Christian who, when once he has broken loose from the faith based upon preconception and external authority, has found that the thing he most dreaded as an enemy of his faith—some output of science, or philosophy, or criticism—has become the ground of new confidence and enthusiasm. Nor is he the last man of such experience who must give an account for his stubborn refusal to face such facts earlier, if indeed not for his sincere but misguided zeal to prevent his Lord from revealing through him truth irreconcilable with his preconceived systems. Peter was no less sincere when he preached a risen Christ than when he forbade a living Christ to speak of his approaching death, but he was wiser and more nearly like his Master.

III.

There was one more stage into which Peter was to enter. His faith, now buttressed by reason, *was to reach out into tolerance*. He failed to see this at first. Men were to become Christians by accepting Jesus as the Christ, but they were also to become Jews. Orthodoxy is very apt to grow myopic, and we know only too well the narrowed horizon of the primitive Christianity of Jerusalem. It is to the honor of Peter that he came to see that the very church he had helped found was wrong; that one need not become a Jew to become a Christian, or even to enjoy the blessings promised to Abraham. Yet he reached this position

of Paul only through effort. Born and bred a Jew, remembering that Jesus had spoken of his own mission as one to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and that he had bidden his early missionaries to go only to Jews, it was with difficulty that Peter brought his thought to the real sweep of Christian life. It required a heavenly vision to justify a visit to the pious gentile Cornelius, and Paul himself to convince him that uncircumcised gentiles might be one's companions at earthly as well as at heavenly feasts. Yet progress he did. By his very constitution his reason waited upon his sympathies, and after Pentecost he still trained his mind to slough off Judaistic exclusiveness, and as his confidence in the rationality of his faith had deepened, so his Christian fellowship broadened. God, he saw, was no respecter of persons, and that in every nation those who fear him and work righteousness are acceptable to him. It was not so much new truth that he had gained; it was rather a new horizon for the old truth. His new experience led him to see, as never before, the richness and completeness of the work of Jesus; and, seeing these, he himself grew broader and his love more inclusive. As he told the brethren in Jerusalem when they stood perplexed before a divine love that failed to observe the bounds of race: "God has made no distinction between Jews and the gentiles, and we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus in like manner as they." And, thus speaking, he was but repeating the words Paul himself had spoken to him at Antioch.

At the same time, his confession of faith needed no restatement. Each new stage was the child of its predecessor, and it needed no new name. It was the content of the confession that grew. To believe that Jesus was the Christ was no longer to believe that he was to be the Christ of Pharisaism; or that he was to be the Christ of Jews alone. It was to believe him a Christ who died and rose again in the interests of all mankind.

It would be impossible to say that, so far as we know, Peter ever outgrew his hopes for a speedy and miraculous return of his Lord, or that he ever quite reached Paul's complete appreciation of the significance of Jesus, but perhaps he had learned an even

greater lesson. For he had learned that the permanent and essential element of one's faith can be freed from the implications resulting from a narrowing past; that a conviction of truth is dangerous if one be not conscious that it may be made even more correct; that orthodoxy may be an actual curse if it be unaccompanied with love. And in the Peter who could learn this lesson we have, indeed, the Rock of the church. For to recognize the elementals of Christianity, and to cleave to them; to be suspicious of all preconceptions that restrict the fellowships of faith; to make theology wait upon love and the content of creeds upon the teachings of life; in a word, to bring one's thought steadily to the test of loyalty to Jesus as the Christ—this is not merely to reproduce the experience of Peter; it is to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.



THE HEAD OF ST. JOHN.—RAPHAEL